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Impact of Social Media: A Thematic Analysis exploring body image and self-esteem amongst 18-24 year old women

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ABSTRACT

Although there is extant literature on the effects of mass media on body image and self-esteem, there has been little qualitative research exploring the effects of social media on solely these two phenomena. Thus, this present study aimed to explore the impact of social media on 18-24 year old women's self-esteem and body image. Previous literature on these phenomena stem from a quantitative approach, using mostly self-report scales. Therefore, the present study explores the link between body image, self-esteem and social media through semi-structured interviews. To gain a rich and deeper understanding of individual's experiences, six women who were aged between 18-24 were recruited using snowball sampling. Once the interviews were conducted, they were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Four themes were highlighted amongst the interviews: *Shifting Perceptions of the Ideal Body*, *Digitally Altering Images*, *Impact of Likes* and *Self-Esteem and Well-Being*. These findings suggest that Social Networking Sites such as Instagram and Facebook have an adverse effect on women's body image and self-esteem, which in turn can impact the well-being of 18-24 year old women. This study provides further support to the claim that social networking sites provide abundant social comparison opportunities (Vogel et al, 2014). Limitations and scope for future research are discussed in full.

KEY WORDS:	BODY IMAGE	SELF -ESTEEM	SOCIAL MEDIA	SOCIAL COMPARISON	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
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Introduction

Context of the research

Social medias global usage has increased 13% since January 2017, with statistics showing that females are the more dominant user, being 6% more likely to indulge in it than males (Chaffey, 2017; Clipson et al, 2012,p.65). With this in mind, we can appreciate the large body of previous literature which suggests that the media has a negative impact on women's self-esteem and body image. Though, these are somewhat outdated as they primarily focus on traditional media. Therefore, considering the increase in social media usage, it deems an essential area for further psychological research. However, there exists a gap in current literature which focuses on the effect social media has on females' self-esteem and body image, from a qualitative approach. Thus, the present study is important as it intends to add to previous literature regarding body image and self-esteem, by using semi-structured interviews. By doing so, we can ultimately understand how body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem develops, allowing for suitable implications to be formed.

Body image

Body image is an intricate and multidimensional construct which encompasses psychological concepts such as attitudes and perceptions of the body, as well as social and sociocultural factors (Tiggemann, 2004; Grogan, 2008). Although being consistently being linked to pathological problems such as depression and eating disorders, the concept of body image has been particularly established with self-esteem amongst adolescent girls and women (Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Smolak, 2004; Wade & Cooper, 1999; Tiggemann, 2005). The link between the two phenomena is bi-directional for girls, with body image influencing self-esteem and vice versa (Park & Epsein, 2013). In Western cultures, it's been suggested that changes in body image causes a decrease in self-esteem during middle adolescence (Clay et al, 2005). Likewise, Van de Berg (2010) found a strong, significant link between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem amongst adolescents. Considering this and the heavy online presence of women on social media, it's important to understand the ways that social media is influencing body dissatisfaction and self-esteem in adolescent females (Perloff, 2014).

The Media, Body Image and Self-Esteem

The study of how media effects women's self-esteem and body image is by no means a new area of research. How the mass media effects these phenomena has been thoroughly researched by a multitude of academics, with research suggesting that the media has a negative effect on self-esteem and body image. For example,

Van Den Berg et al (2007) found media body comparisons facilitated relationships between self-esteem, depression, dieting and negative body image. Likewise, Hargreaves & Tiggemann (2003) found that print advertisements impacted participants' perception of 'the thin ideal' and had a negative effect on their body satisfaction. Due to the bi-directional link between body image and self-esteem, a variety of existing literature suggests the medias effect on body image has a knock-on effect to self-esteem. For example, Fernandez & Pritchard (2012) found a relationship between drive for thinness and media influence, as well as drive for thinness and self-esteem. Supporting this, it's been found that the media transmits the thin ideal in a way that negatively forms the development of body image, which acts as a precedent of low self-esteem (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006).

The abundance of social media has grown exponentially and is considered a modern development which consists of websites and applications that support editing content, idea sharing and relationship building through interaction (O'Keeffe et al, 2011, Mount & Martinez, 2014). There is an increasing body of research around this area which suggests social media can be detrimental to body image. For example, Eckler et al (2017) found that the more time spent on Facebook related to greater body comparisons and increased body dissatisfaction. Supporting this, it's been found that Facebook users scored significantly higher on body dissatisfaction measures than non-users (Tiggemann, 2017). It has however been considered that it's not the amount of time spent on Facebook, but rather the time spent engaging in 'photo activity' which relates to body image concerns (Meier & Gray, 2014). Thus, the social networking site Instagram has been more heavily researched in the last few years as it's solely photo and video based. One key goal of Instagram users is to gain a considerable amount of 'likes', which has been associated with peer recognition of physical appearance and popularity (Sheldon et al, 2015; Chua & Chang, 2016). Aside from peer acknowledgment, images of fitness models have also been suggested to have an adverse effect on body image. A recent trend called 'Fitspiration' consists of images involving women engaging in exercise and eating healthy food. Although promoting a healthy lifestyle through exercise, self-care and healthy-eating, the majority of the women in the images exhibit a thin and toned body shape (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Whilst this figure is not as thin as women found in fashion magazines, it has been found that the 'Fitspiration' trend has a negative impact on body image (Santarossa et al, 2016).

Aside from body image, there is some indication that social media use has a direct negative impact on individual's health, particularly self-esteem (Woods & Scott, 2016; Barker, 2009). Commonly, the power of 'likes' received on social networking sites influences self-esteem, with research suggesting a positive association between number of likes received on Facebook profile photos and self-esteem (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). Additionally, the concept of 'selfies' on social networking sites have an adverse effect on self-esteem, with research suggesting engagement

in self-presentation through selfie taking is linked to issues of insecurity and low self-esteem (Shin et al, 2017; Chua & Chang, 2016). Explanations for the impact of likes on self-esteem generally suggest that social media users feel the need to belong and perceive the likes as validation (Gangadharbatla, 2008; Zell & Moeller, 2018). Literature regarding social media and self-esteem is developing but needs further research as little studies explore the combination of both body image and self-esteem. Furthermore, research in this area is often conducted using self-report techniques, which often don't account for individual's experiences. Therefore, the present study aimed to fulfil this gap in the literature by exploring body image and self-esteem via semi-structured interviews to gain a richer understanding on how these phenomena interlink.

Theoretical Framework

A large body of theoretical research exists which aids our understanding of body image and the media. Research is often underpinned by self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989), which comprises of three domains of the self: The actual self, the ideal self and the ought self (Vartanian, 2012). These domains particularly relate to body image research as it's well documented that there is a discrepancy between how someone sees themselves and how this person would ideally like to be. Body image research underpinned by this theory has suggested a causal relationship between long term exposure to thin-ideal media and developing self-discrepancies (Harrison, 2001). Likewise, Bessenoff (2006) found when exposed to thin-ideal advertisements, women with high self-discrepancies were less satisfied with their body than women with low self-discrepancies. However, Bessenoff (2006) also found that those with high levels of body self-discrepancy were more likely to engage in social comparison to thin-ideal media. This concept of social comparison within body image is more recent and relevant, as it directly relates to social media usage, which is a more recent phenomenon.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) understands that people learn about their own attitudes, beliefs and abilities by comparing themselves to other people around them (Suls & Wheeler, 2013). The theory states that there are two types of comparisons. Firstly, downward comparisons, which occur when someone compares themselves to another and find the other to be worse off. Secondly, upward comparisons, which occur when someone compares themselves to another, but find themselves to be worse off (Suls & Wheeler, 2013). Considering social comparison encompasses self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement (Kraye et al, 2008), we can understand how it directly links with social media usage. Social media users can convey their personal characteristics via posts and photos which can allow them to make upward or downward comparisons to others, or as a target for others to compare against (Vogel et al, 2014).

Research in to body image seeks to investigate individual's thoughts, opinions and perceptions towards their appearance and understands one's view of their body image may be influenced through the media (Halliwell, 2012). The media reflects society's ideologies, which are constantly evolving and changing the expectations of what the female body should compose. For example, in 2000 the notion of 'Thin is Dangerously in' found that the ideal body shape was becoming thinner (Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000). However, due to the influence of social media and 'fitspiration' accounts, the ideal body is now being promoted as 'thin but toned' (Krane et al, 2001). Social media users can view these 'fitspiration' images and accordingly make upward or downward comparisons, which can have a negative impact on body image and self-esteem (e.g. Santarossa et al, 2016; Tiggemann, 2015). Though, majority of studies which support this are taken from a quantitative view and lack emotional depth. Considering today's younger generation have been heavily brought up through media based platforms, to fully understand the effect of social media on body image and self-esteem, the present study focuses on 18-24 year old women's experiences of social comparison.

Present Study

Given that existing research predominantly uses quantitative methods, the present study conducted semi-structured interviews to explore 18-24 year old females perceptions of body image and self-esteem, as influenced by social media. There are various theories which aim to explore body image and self-esteem as phenomena, including Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989). However, the present research is underpinned by social comparison theory.

Research Questions:

"To examine Duchesne et al's (2017) research which states a negative perception of one's body has the effect of lowering self-esteem"

"To test Perloff's (2014) claim that Social Media exerts a potent impact on the development of body dissatisfaction"

"Testing Andreassen et al's (2017) statement that frequent social media usage is related to lower self-esteem"

Methodology

Design

Taking a qualitative approach deemed the most appropriate way for exploring how 18-24 year old females perceive their bodies and self-esteem, through personal

experience of social media. Qualitative research is data which can signify an account of the participants' feelings, thoughts and emotions (Quinlan, 2011). As a result of exploring such factors, qualitative research can allow researchers to gain an understanding of the individual's perspective, which is significant for this area of sensitive research. Qualitative research allows for exploration of a more intricate and multifaceted picture of participant's experiences, as opposed to quantitative which offers participants an assumption to respond to (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, six 30-minute Semi-structured interviews were employed to fit in line with Madill et al (2005) who state that undergraduate qualitative research should have at least 3 hours' worth of data to analyse.

Participants

For the current study, participants consisted of women aged 18-24. This sample was selected as it's essential to choose individuals who have first-hand experienced the phenomena being investigated (Cresswell, 2007). Considering the high percentage of female users on social media and their vulnerability to body image and self-esteem, this sample deemed most appropriate. Additionally, researchers have called for more research on the effect of new media on the emerging adulthood stage (Brown, 2006). The ages 18-25 fit in this late adolescence/early adulthood stage, which is a critical time for social skills, self-dependence and identity formation (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the present study used 6 females due to findings of previous research which suggest body image and self-esteem issues which are triggered by social media are more prevalent amongst young women. Participants were chosen through snowball sampling, considering they met the inclusion criteria and none of the exclusion criteria. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, using a smaller sample allows for a clearer understanding of the participant's attitudes towards the issues being discussed, allowing for in-depth data to be collected.

Figure 1. *Participant information*

Participant Pseudonym: Wallis Gender: Female Age: 21 Occupation: University Student Ethnicity: Asian	Participant Pseudonym: Jane Gender: Female Age: 24 Occupation: Working full time Ethnicity: White	Participant Pseudonym: Esther Gender: Female Age: 18 Occupation: University Student Ethnicity: White
Participant Pseudonym: Ali Gender: Female Age: 21	Participant Pseudonym: Cathy Gender: Female Age: 22	Participant Pseudonym: Fiona Gender: Female Age: 19

Occupation: Working full time Ethnicity: Lebanese	Occupation: University Student Ethnicity: White	Occupation: Working Ethnicity: African American
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Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with the intent to gain rich, in-depth data. By using semi-structured interviews, it allows the participant's some flexibility in responding to questions which further ensures the participants can openly provide narratives related to the phenomena being studied. Questions were designed encompassing an open-ended style which allowed fluidity of responses. An interview schedule was designed which consisted of questions focusing on body image and self-esteem, which were built around prior literature. All participants received an invitation letter before the interviews and a signed consent form. To consent, participant's read an information sheet which explained the nature of the research and their involvement was agreed at this stage, allowing them to sign the consent form. Here, the participants were also informed that they could refuse to answer any questions and that it was possible to withdraw their participation and data from the study by a particular date. Once the consent form was signed, the interviews were conducted in a quiet room at Brooks Building in Manchester Metropolitan University. The interviews were set up to last 30-40 minutes and were recorded using audio recording equipment. Upon concluding the interview, participants were given a verbal debrief and a debrief sheet which contained the university counselling contact details.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used when analysing the data collected. The use of this approach deemed obvious as it's considered the most suitable analysis method for any study which employs a low-level interpretation (Vaismoradi, 2013). It is useful for deducing meaning in a dataset and highlights which themes are important in the description of the phenomenon under research (Daly et al, 1997). Once the interviews were transcribed, analysis of the data followed, which required reading through the transcripts in order to recognise any emerging themes. The coding process was informed by Braune and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines which provide step-by-step instructions on how to analyse text generated from in-depth interviews. They recommend that researchers work systematically throughout the dataset, providing in depth and equal attention to the data, and identifying important and frequent aspects in the data which may form the foundation of themes (Braune & Clarke, 2006). The findings of this research produced additional literature regarding body image and self-esteem.

Analysis & Discussion

After conducting the thematic analysis, 4 themes emerged throughout the transcripts. These 4 central but sometimes overlapping themes encapsulated a deeper understanding of young female's experiences of self-esteem and body image through social media. In this section, the analysis of qualitative data aims to answer the research questions stated previously. The 4 themes were discovered: 'Shifting Perceptions of the Ideal Body,' 'Digitally altering images', 'Impact of Likes' and 'Self-esteem and well-being'. Discussions revealed the importance of the social networking sites Instagram and Facebook in relation to the participant's self-esteem and body image.

Theme 1: Shifting Perceptions of the Ideal Body

Influence of Social Media

One of the themes that initially started developing from the interviews was that participants felt the perceived ideal body shape has altered over the years. The majority of participants explained how the ideal body type has changed from being skinny to being toned, with emphasis placed on having a small waist, big bottom and toned legs. It was important for the researcher to gain an idea of where this ideal body shape emerged from. Participant Fiona explained how she would *"like this toned body that the media is pushing upon people"* (Line 174), with 3 more participants discussing how social media, particularly fitness accounts influenced this:

"All these gym fanatics on Instagram who are naturally skinny have now toned up to get that ideal body of having a big bum and flat stomach. That didn't used to be a thing, skinny used to be a thing."

(Jane, 197-199)

"Before social media and 'fitspo' accounts I'm sure people went by what their BMI should be and stay on the skinnier side, but now it's to be as thin as possible whilst having curves in the right places"

(Esther, 181-183)

"The ideal is slim but thick, which means small waist but massive bum and toned thighs. If you don't have any of these it's a problem. Gym has become a huge thing for women to achieve this figure, it was a lot easier to just be skinny."

(Wallis, 138-141)

Taking in to account the quotes mentioned, it's clear to see that shifting perceptions of the ideal body are influenced by external factors such as social networking sites. As Esther mentioned, 'Fitspo' and 'Fitspiration' are trends on Instagram which motivate towards a healthy lifestyle through exercising and clean eating (Santarossa et al, 2016). Although the images can be motivating, they also have a negative effect on body image. This is because they only promote the thin and toned body type, in accord with the current sociocultural ideals (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016; Krane et al, 2001).

Male Ideologies

Aside from social media being an influential factor in the shifting body ideal, a couple of participants believe the influence of males could also be a factor. Although Cathy explains the *"whole thin ideal concept is changing"* and that *"it's more about being toned"* (Line 136), she suggests this isn't necessarily due to the influence of social media. It could perhaps be that the effect of social media on the ideal body may be mediated by sexist beliefs:

"A lot of women think they're lifting weights to get stronger because of gender equality and the fact it's now more acceptable. Let's face it, it's because men want this hourglass figure which is only possible through lifting weights."

(Cathy, 138-141)

"These slim but thick girls get a lot of approval from guys, so although you're seeing these fitness accounts everywhere online, I don't think people would be obsessed over getting this kind of body if it wasn't for the guy's reaction."

(Wallis, 144-146)

"I still never had the body shape of these women that everyone was idolising. I have a very straight down body, wide waist and narrow hips and that isn't what men want nowadays."

(Ali, 182-184)

These quotes support the notion that female body esteem is shaped by benevolent sexism, which suggests that women seek to conform to cultural standards of female attractiveness (Forbes et al, 2004). These women receive social rewards for conforming, however their status is diminished as they're less likely to be treated as equals (Franzoi, 2001). Considering men's ideal women have an hourglass figure with a small waist-to-hip ratio (Crossley et al, 2012) it could explain the emergence of this ideal female body type.

Theme 2: Digitally Altering Images

Editing Apps

Another major theme which emerged from the set of interviews was participant's knowledge of digitally altered images and how they have a negative impact on women. Four of the participants went on to discuss the issues of re-touching on apps like Photoshop and how it's a negative trend:

"People even edit their photos on apps to look better, or what they think looks better. It's a stupid concept as you're changing your body to look what other people want your body to look like. It ultimately makes you feel bad about yourself as you think that's what these people really look like."

(Esther, 126-128)

"I'll admit I edit my photos on Photoshop and FaceTune on my iPhone, it's not that I'm really self-conscious about my body but when it comes to posting a photo online there must be zero imperfections as people analyse the photo and judge you accordingly."

(Fiona, 113-116)

"You can get rid of bags, slim your waist, make your skin look one shade. All that is really negative on your self-esteem because it's just the reality of it."

(Wallis, 193-195)

"If you don't know the photo is edited then you're going to assume that this body naturally has no imperfections, which has a knock-on effect to your self-esteem."

(Ali, 222-224)

Another participant spoke about how digitally altering photos has made her 'extremely sceptical' (line 24) about what products are even legitimate anymore. She automatically assumes every image on social media that is advertising a product has been edited on Photoshop. She went on to discuss how digitally altering images negatively impacts her self-esteem:

"A lot of celebrities get paid to promote a product on Instagram, for example they take these pills that clear your skin up and post a photo of them airbrushed. So, when you actually buy the product nothing happens and it really effects your self-esteem because you think why don't I look like that photo"

(Cathy, 113-116)

Selfies

A common subtheme that presented itself was that of 'selfies.' This term is typically explained as being a photograph one has taken of oneself on a smart phone, to then

be uploaded on a social media platform. Participants discussed the prevalence of individuals digitally altering these kind of photos:

"It's selfies that are the issue. People don't really edit photos of themselves if they're with a group of friends, or if they're posting a photo online of someone who isn't them. It's selfies that are airbrushed with enlarged eyes and skinny faces, its all lies though."

(Esther, 143-146)

"People take selfies to show their friends how good they look, it's always a competition of who can look the best. But I look at them sometimes and think, your nose has definitely been edited to look smaller and your lips to be bigger."

(Ali, 129-131)

It was apparent throughout the interviews that the concept of taking 'selfies' meant that they'd get more followers. Explanations for the taking of these photos is backed up by research from Burrow & Rainone (2007) who found that the number of likes received on participant's Facebook profile pictures was positively correlated with self-esteem. Thus, participants who take selfies could be using them as a way to feel better about themselves:

"When you post a selfie, you get a lot of guys following you which is nice cause you know they thought it was attractive"

(Fiona, 106-107)

"When I will post a selfie, it is to hopefully get a few followers so that I feel good about myself."

(Jane, 142-143)

The concept of 'selfies' is associated with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). According to the theory, the need for self-evaluation drives individuals to search for comparisons with others who they view as similar, with related attributes (Kulik & Gump, 1997). Therefore, selfies and selfie-editing entails social comparison because it's often based on the desire to look better than others. Participant Wallis and Esther stated:

"In terms of friends everything seems like a competition. Who can post the best selfie, who can get the most likes."

(Wallis, 45-46)

"Things start to feel like a competition on who can be the best looking of the friendship group."

(Esther, 198-199)

This quote is in line with previous research, which suggests social media users and 'selfies' are positively correlated with social comparison of appearance (Chae, 2017).

Theme 3: Impact of Likes

This theme focused on the impact of likes in response to posting a photo on social media. One of the main goals of Instagram users is to gain a considerable amount of "Likes" as they validate their popularity and status amongst their peers (Sheldon, 2015). This concept was prevalent across a few of the participants:

"how many likes you get indicates how well known you are. It's like an ID, people can see how popular you are before they know you, they can get a feel about what you're like depending on the response to your photos."
(Wallis, 59-62)

"I think the whole concept of likes is just an acceptance thing so people want to get as many as possible to show their hundreds or thousands of followers on Facebook or Instagram that they're liked."
(Ali, 61-53)

"the number of comments or likes or the number of followers a friend has, makes me feel low about myself sometimes because you feel less popular"
(Cathy, 187-188)

There are various theories on psychological development of emerging adults which state that young adults explore their self-identity by seeking constant approval from peers (Arnett, 2004). As aforementioned in the 'selfie' subtheme, this is backed up by research from Burrow & Rainone (2017) who found a positive correlation between the number of likes received on Facebook profile photos and self-esteem. Since a basic psychological need individuals have is the need to be seen and valued (Greenwood, 2013), this could explain why the participant's feel like social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram reflect their need to belong.

Additional to likes being an indicator of popularity, participants also established how they were an indicator of attractiveness. The following evidence supports a study from Chua & Chang (2016) which found that women associate likes with peer recognition of their physical appearance.

"I know personally if I don't get 100 likes on a photo of myself I get very upset because that's the standard amount of likes I'll get on a selfie. If you don't get as

many as you hope you start to question if it's ugly"
(Ali, 57-60)

"It's embarrassing to admit it but likes are essential when it comes to social media. I remember 6 months ago changing my profile photo on Facebook and it only got 25 like and I felt so unattractive for ages"
(Cathy, 72-74)

"I'm a sucker for a like. Who would have thought something so meaningless could mean so much to me. I post a photo I think is nice and I receive loads of likes and I feel so god damn good about myself, look in the mirror and feel happy."
(Fiona, 64-67)

Theme 4: Self-Esteem and Well-Being

The effect of social media and body image on self-esteem and well-being was a popular area through the participant's experiences. This theme ties in to the others, considering self-esteem is effected by number of likes, digitally altering images and unrealistic body types.

Well-Being

A sub-theme that arose was that of well-being. From the interviews, it was apparent that participant's self-esteem was detrimental to their anxiety:

"There is no winning in this situation because I'm either mentally unhappy in terms of being depressed, but super skinny. Or I am the size I am not but mentally unhappy in terms of being extremely anxious."
(Ali, 239-241)

"By having a bad view of my body, it caused a lot of distress in my life. I have always struggled with self-esteem problems and anxiety. These rocketed when I was most unhappy with my body and like I said before I even deleted Instagram."
(Esther, 203-205)

"When people see the real you just walking to the post office it brings up anxiety, as you don't look how you do online"
(Fiona, 197-199)

Considering body image is closely correlated with self-esteem and self-esteem predicts anxiety (Szabo, 2015; Sowislo et al, 2013) we can begin to understand why the participant's anxiety is more severe when they have negative interpretations of their body. A couple of the women described their body dissatisfaction as having an

effect so serious they considered themselves to having severe eating disturbances. A justification in to this could be explained by the Tripartite Influence Model of Body Image (Van de Berg et al, 2002). This theory suggests appearance pressures from friends, family and the media are influential in the formation of a negative body image and restrained eating behaviours (Huxley et al, 2014).

“I went through a breakup and lost about 2 stone in a couple of months. Even though I was in a bad place mentally, I was happy that I was skinny. I realised I was intentionally not eating, but kept going till I was under 8 stone.”
(Jane, 223-226)

“It started when I went to school and these girls would only eat chewing gum all day as apparently, this gives your stomach the illusion you’re eating. I knew I wasn’t fat but I was still unhappy with my body, I wanted to be able to see my ribs and my collar bone like my friends. I think I went 3 months before realising something was wrong.”
(Cathy, 162-166)

Online vs Reality

Additional to well-being, it was clear throughout the interviews that participants consistently felt their online self was more attractive than their reality, which caused issues with their self-esteem and confidence:

“My online self is very fun and flirty so I want to post provocative stuff but then my real self is thinking stop what you’re doing this isn’t really you, people will meet you and be like is this the same person?”
(Esther, 116-119)

“It’s definitely this whole concept of people seeing your social media as an ID, it makes people scared to face others in the real world.”
(Cathy, 206-208)

“If I was walking down the street and I saw someone I knew, I would cross the road if I didn’t have any make up on. Because that’s not how you look online.”
(Jane, 138-140)

This thematic analysis has explored 18-24 year old women’s experiences of social media and the detrimental effects it can induce. The following critical evaluation discusses these findings in relation to other research and suggestions are made for further research.

Critical Evaluation

In relation to the research questions posed, the analysis revealed that:

- Social media has a negative impact on self-esteem, as a result of digitally altered images, unrealistic body types and 'likes'.
- Social media is an important indicator of body dissatisfaction, which is strongly influenced by 'fitspiration' accounts and photo editing.
- Body dissatisfaction negatively impacts individual's self-esteem and well-being, especially in terms of anxiety.

The current study aimed to explore the effect social media has on 18-24 year old females' body image and self-esteem. Unlike previous studies (Eckler et al. 2017; Tiggemann. 2017), which adopted a quantitative approach, this procedure involved in-depth interviewing followed by thematic analysis which was analysed in line with Braune and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. Concluding remarks from this research suggest that social media is an influencing component in the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction and self-esteem. The findings indicate that beauty ideals are continuously shifting, meaning attaining one is not possible (theme 1). The researcher also found that digitally altering images such as selfies, through the likes of Photoshop and iPhone apps, has a particularly aversive impact on women's self-esteem (theme 2). Additionally, the number of likes has been suggested to indicate popularity and attractiveness, with individuals viewing likes as peer validation (theme 3). Finally, findings show body dissatisfaction negatively impacts self-esteem and well-being. Considering body image is learned and influenced by self-esteem (Lightstone, 2001) we can understand that social media is impacting body image which in turn effects self-esteem.

Using a qualitative approach in the present study is arguably a key strength as it has allowed for in-depth, detailed accounts of the individual's experiences which cannot be encapsulated in quantitative research. Furthermore, the present study has built on the limited qualitative literature around social media, body image and self-esteem. Through exploration of the research questions, four key themes were identified which were related to the previous literature covered in the introduction.

However, it is important to comprehend the findings of this research in light of its criticisms. A limitation of this study is that it solely focuses on females, thus, the findings should not be taken as a generalisation for both genders. With this in mind, it's been found that ideal media images negatively impact males body satisfaction and self-esteem (Hobza et al, 2007). Therefore, future research on the effect of social media on body image and self-esteem in males deems imperative. By doing so, it would help provide a broader picture and a better understanding of how social media impacts males self-esteem and body image. Additionally, the current study

has been conducted in a westernised society using a white sample from the UK. Considering western cultures share the same unrealistic thin 'body perfect' ideal (Bell & Dittmar, 2011), further research should be conducted exploring the effects of social media on body image and self-esteem in different racial and ethnic groups.

A further criticism of this study is that the sample size was relatively small. This study consisted of six participants, which could be considered a limitation because we cannot generalise to all 18-24 year old females, since the research does not cover an extensive range of perspectives. Future research in this area could explore a larger sample to gain a more comprehensive understanding into body image, self-esteem and social media in women.

Findings from the analysis pose questions such as "is social media the strongest indicator of body dissatisfaction, through a link between internalisation of the ideal body and digitally altered images?" Or "do other external variables such as peers, influence the negative attitudes people have towards their bodies and self-esteem?" These variables interlink at a much larger perspective and the role of social comparison plays a part, with individual's using social networking sites to provide a platform for self-presentation amongst peers (Vogel et al, 2014). Thus, both social media and the interaction of peers should be considered significant influences on body image and self-esteem attitudes. This knowledge should be applied to media campaigns that promote positive body image such as The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty and Missguided's Unretouched Campaign. By doing so, individuals may feel less pressure to digitally alter their photos, which could break the damaging upward comparisons that occur amongst peers.

Reflexive Analysis

When adopting a qualitative approach, it's important to understand that the researchers' reflections on their actions, observations and feelings become data which is subjective and form part of the interpretation (Flick, 2014). Thus, by being reflexive it allows for critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality and that this position may affect research outcome (Berger, 2015).

Firstly, it's important to consider that in qualitative research, being reflexive in the matter of personal reflexivity is essential, as experiences and viewpoints can shape the analysis of the phenomena being researched (Watt, 2007). Therefore, I found inspiration to pursue research in this topic due to personal experiences. From my perspective, social media has always been viewed in a positive light, a way to interact with your friends and share your life experiences. Initially, from a vague viewpoint that is correct, however when consuming in it for a long period of time it's clear that detrimental effects surface. Therefore, my interest in exploring this phenomenon stemmed from growing up in the millennials era and witnessing the

effects first hand over the years. Finally, considering current research has taken a quantitative approach, I wanted to develop a better understanding of women's experiences as self-report techniques provide little information on lived experiences.

Whilst the process of planning and writing a dissertation has been challenging and time consuming, it has also been gratifying and has prepared me for further study. My experience during data collection was particularly difficult and due to circumstances beyond my control I had to rearrange two interviews. Consequently, my schedule was slightly off and I felt the interviews became quite rushed. On reflection, I feel participants could have had the opportunity to expand more on their responses if I hadn't stuck so strongly to the interview questions and had used more general probes. When listening back to the interviews I realised there were a lot of openings for further questions but due to my inexperience, I missed out on such opportunities. As a result of this, I did reword some questions. For example, I initially asked "what do you like and dislike about social networking sites?" but found this gave a vague response and asked what they liked about them as one question and what they disliked as another. I also found that after conducting several of the interviews my interpersonal skills developed well and the conversations flowed with more ease which allowed for the participants to further open up about their experiences. To conclude, the growing phenomena of social media deems an essential area for psychological research, especially in terms of its effects on body image and self-esteem.

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